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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR DRL (COFSKY), NSC STAFF FOR PASCUAL

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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [SOCI](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN MONASTERY CLASH: RESOLUTION EXPECTED SOON

REF: A. CAIRO 1193
[B](#). CAIRO 1111

Classified By: A/DCM William R. Stewart for reason 1.4(d).

Summary and Background

1.(SBU) There have been no reports since early June of further violence at Deir Abu Fana, a Coptic Christian monastery located near Minya in Upper Egypt. The monastery was the site of a May 31 attack on Coptic monks by neighboring Bedouin villagers. The GoE continues to station security forces near the entrance to the monastery. Thirteen Bedouin attackers and two Christian monastery workers remain in custody while the GoE investigates the attack, which escalated into the kidnapping and physical abuse of three monks and the death, reportedly by gunshot, of one Bedouin villager. On July 18, Egypt's quasi-governmental National Council on Human Rights (NCHR) issued a report in which it attributed the violence to a land dispute, but noted that the incident has been exploited by religious "extremists" on both sides and criticized the GoE for not doing more to address overall sectarian tensions. According to media reports, an ad hoc committee formed with the approval of the Coptic Church and the local government will soon announce its decision to divide disputed lands between the monastery and the Bedouin village of Qasr Hur. End summary and background.

Title to the Land

2.(C) In a June 30 conversation, Coptic Church official Bishop Demetrios, whose bishopric includes the monastery, told us that the motive for the Bedouin attack - which damaged a monk's "cell" and chapel, a wall, and farm equipment - was to prevent the monastery from controlling desert land located approximately 1 kilometer from the main monastery compound; land the monastery is developing for agricultural purposes. According to Bishop Demetrios, the monastery claims title to the land by virtue of its work in improving the property. Under Egyptian law, it is possible to acquire title to vacant, government-owned land by occupying it for a number of years, making improvements, and registering claims with various ministries and the local government. According to the Arab-West Center, an NGO that tracks inter-faith issues in Egypt and whose researchers visited Abu Fana in July, the monastery may have entered into unregistered agreements known as "urfi" contracts (based on traditional and customary law, not official statutory law) with the Qasr Hur Bedouin to purchase whatever claim the villagers may have had to the land. For its part, the GoE and the local government insist that the land belongs to the government.

3.(C) According to the Arab-West Center, the monastery does not have legal title to the land that was the focus of the attack. Rather, the monastery is expanding rapidly and "attempting to establish facts on the ground" by building monk's cells and converting the arid desert land into farmland. The monastery's efforts are not illegal or uncommon in Egypt, but are, according the Center, fueling tensions with the Bedouin villagers who also covet the land. (Note: According to Bishop Demetrios, the Bedouin seek to plunder antiquities which lie buried in the land in question. End note.)

4.(SBU) Landowners frequently experience difficulties with Egypt's Bedouin tribes, particularly when their lands adjoin desert. Egyptian landowners sometimes feel compelled to make payments to Bedouin to avoid such disputes. The tensions in this instance were likely intensified because the monastery and the village of Qasr Hur are both expanding into desert land which served as a buffer between the communities, both of which are growing rapidly. Moreover, it is not uncommon for land disputes in Egypt to lead to violence. For example, on July 3, a land dispute in the Nile Delta village of Mit Abou al-Attar turned violent, resulting in 10 deaths and 17 injuries. That dispute, between rival Muslim clans, attracted little media attention.

Possible Settlement

5.(SBU) In late July, a prominent Coptic businessman, Adel Labib, and a Muslim member of parliament, Alaa Hussenein, both from the Minya area, offered to form a committee to investigate the land ownership issue and to recommend a solution. Both the Coptic Church and the Governor of Minya accepted the offer and reportedly agreed to be bound by the committee's decision. That decision will reportedly be announced on August 14. Already, there are press reports that the committee has decided to designate a large portion of the disputed land as a state-owned buffer between the monastery and the villagers, while awarding smaller adjoining portions to the monastery and village.

6.(C) Comment: The Abu Fana incident would likely have gone unremarked were it not for the clear sectarian overtones, which the Bedouin attackers accentuated through their kidnapping and mistreatment of the monks. The Bedouin, who are generally seen as trouble makers, are eliciting little public sympathy. There is significant public support for the GoE's position that the underlying dispute has nothing to do with religion, but is about land. For its part, Egypt's Coptic leadership now seems committed to working with the government to find a resolution. However, even if an immediate solution is found, land disputes in Egypt, with its growing population and limited arable land, can fester for years and quickly turn violent, and there are no guarantees that this will not happen in the future at Abu Fana.

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